

Day 1 Nov. 13th

We arrived at Banjul airport about 1am- air temperature 24*. The two flights: Heathrow- Lisbon, Lisbon- The Gambia, had meant a very long day (with not particularly brilliant service/ food on the Portuguese airline).

It took a while to get through Customs as photos + all finger & thumb prints are taken! Also, my trumpet case was "pulled" over so I had to show & explain things to a curious security man!

Quickly to bed after the short drive to Farato. Easy to see, even in the dark, how basic all buildings are.

Awoke to warmth & the sound of birdsong + children's voices. After breakfast: cereal, yogurt, tea, banana & crusty bread with jam/ Marmite- Karen showed me the school premises where every class of happy, busy children greeted us & I was introduced to all their teachers.

It's even more basic, in terms of facilities, than I had gauged from the photo presentation but the classrooms were tidy & the atmosphere friendly and focused on the subject of the lessons in hand.

I needed to rest (due to the humidity & journey fatigue) before coffee-time on the veranda. There's an array of plants & trees typical of a warm climate:

Banana Palm, Papaya, Oleander, Bourganvillea, an Orange tree + an abundance of bird visitors- bright flashes of colour & difficult to photograph. Sun Finch/ Firefinch, Red cheeked Cordon Bleu. Weaver birds basket like nests and, frequently, vultures in the sky!

Spent most of the afternoon cutting out bird shapes & folding paper like fans- for wings.

Karen & Tony have lots of admin. work to attend to & various members of staff pop in for meetings/ discussions.

I'm getting used to the typical sounds on site: insects, birds, children & the "Call to prayer". It really is a world apart from Kent!

We are lucky to have electricity and use of fans in the bungalow- humidity & temperatures are consistently high (34/38*-daytime).

In bed early after supper of spiced vegetables- including Okra & Aubergine, couscous + fresh salad. I drank more good coffee whilst K&T had cold bottled beer!

Day 2 Nov. 14th

Had lots of sleep- not even hearing the early call to prayer! After breakfast K & I joined a group of children under a large Neem tree (it's leaves can be boiled to produce a cure for Malaria!) Teacher Mamut is using Karen's own Reading Scheme books & the mixed group were coping well reading aloud sentence- by-sentence, breaking some words down phonetically.

I then went into Nursery 4 classroom to observe a Maths lesson: sums adding up to 10.

8 children per table- some using chalk boards, others notebooks + pencils. All copied sums from the board & the less able used large counters to help calculate

their answers.

Then, all outside for an enormous "in & out" circle- game learning about odd & even numbers: highly entertaining & successful.

Local, colourfully dressed ladies arrived, heads piled high with break time food for sale at the Pupils Market. After break it was a craft session & so I demonstrated my fan- winged birds & asked suitable bird- related questions whilst the teacher, assistant & Abi Batu (Deputy Head) cut out enough bird shapes for the 40 children. Pupils then wrote their names on them, stuck on wobbly eyes, coloured & stuck on feathers with great enthusiasm!

With help, later, I've folded paper wings & cut a slit in each bird body- ready to complete tomorrow. So, I've had a bird-day & K has had a day devoted to observing reading sessions & collating her Reading Scheme resources. (Lots of footballs landed in the garden followed by boys to search & reclaim!)

Day 3 Nov. 15th

Had to set an alarm as I'd been invited to the Friday Assembly at 8.30am.

Whole school in class rows. Some older pupils sang & did Speech- presentations. I was welcomed officially & felt very honoured to be invited to speak; I tried to explain who I was & what projects I hope to share and decided that, next Friday I will play the Gambian National Anthem to lead the singing! K & I found the words & notation on the Internet so I've written the music out and even found time & energy to do some trumpet practice.

In N4 we helped the children add wings & strings to their birds- all now hanging across the classroom. Then we sang If you're happy and you know it....! Very satisfying watching animated faces & busy fingers; they did really well glueing in such warm conditions.

Back on the veranda for coffee & bird-watch: I also managed to photograph a large black & white butterfly.

Began cutting circular bird body- shapes for N3. More fiddly scissor work for 40 beaks & " combs". Rocking chickens next week!

Staff, caretaker and the Headmaster came & went as did several " uninvited " children: lots of visitors. Running a school is an enormous task, often very challenging for K & T who seem to have endless patience!

About 5pm I went, with Tony, out of the school compound into local shopping streets. Eggs sold singly & not in a carton! Bananas & nuts from street traders small stands. Very warm, dusty with busy main road traffic, goats, donkeys & carts. Most people knew T of course & asked about Karen. I shook hands with several people who had welcoming smiles & words. It would be impossible to describe the contrast between this experience & being in Fremlin Walk or on Tenterden High Street!

Day 4 Nov. 16th

Lazy Saturday/ High humidity.

Highlight of the day was bird watching- Sunbird & Firefinch (we think). Also did a lot of felt-tip colouring over the illustrations in one of K's reading scheme books. She is so skilled and diligent- there seems to be no end to her educational expertise.

Also did some quiet reading & emailed photos to Lenham & Ulcombe church people which will, hopefully, be shared with others at tomorrow's services.

Did my second trumpet practice session (sitting on the edge of my bed with fan blowing on me!) concentrating on the, now correct, notation of the Gambian National Anthem.

Tomorrow's plan is church then beach with lunch whilst there.

Have just watched Yalding Dog enjoying her supper of chicken & rice left- overs

Day 5 Nov. 17th

Well, of course, the best laid plans....no church service locally at the Church of the Good Shepherd as it was a Patronal Festival in the next village with a joint service there! Came home after hot walk to do some more colouring & drink coffee as Tony had gone with Abdoulie to secure the purchase of a new (second hand) vehicle as he's the always-available driver during K&T's stays.

We drove for about 45minutes- some tarmac- odd stretches of dual-carriageway but lots of off-road journey time on dry, brick-red, dusty potholed tracks: just like being with Justin in the jeep in Tanzania!

We arrived, not as bounty hunters, but hot, hungry & thirsty at the Jungle Beach: white sand, palm trees, beach bar + restaurant & hammocks.

I wandered over hot sand to paddle in the warm, shallow ocean water. Lots of small, dead fish....to be collected later? A new fish meal factory built by the Chinese nearby has interfered with the food fishing industry locally: not good for employment or economy long term or the environment (+ very smelly!) Lunch was ordered and came, eventually by 3pm! (GMT= Gambian Maybe Time!) So, plenty of time for cold beers, Mango juice & tea.

More paddling for me - K&T swam later, + lazy crossword & reading on the wooden sun beds in partial shade with a lovely breeze. As we drove away, about 6pm, the sound of a local drumming group- wonderful.

Uneventful journey home; shopping streets still busy with colourfully dressed people enjoying their Sunday evening. I am still amazed/ horrified at the amount of corrugated panels in use as roof, fencing & general building or what, to us, are often just "shacks" along the roads or in compounds. The unfair distribution of wealth, commodities & resources across the world in 2019 is quite appalling and disturbing to acknowledge.

Day 6 Nov. 18th

Start of school somewhat delayed- classroom doors locked & no key to be found....padlocks broken to gain access!

Another bird-craft project: rocking chickens with N3. What did they learn? Circle, semi-circle, beak, comb, folding, colouring & sticking. The folded birds balance easily on the string across the classroom. Just got them singing the first 4 lines of Chick, chick....chicken- lay a little egg for me..K had told me they don't bother about "rhyming" so it was ".....want one for my dinner!!" After break, Phonics with N4 using Box 1 of the puzzle/ spelling card sets I brought over with me (donated by Mandy, congregant in Lenham). 8 sets of cards each with a 3letter word to sound & say aloud. Able & I worked round the 5 tables and tomorrow will repeat that with the slower learners but move on to Box 2 with the others.

Back on the veranda, Yalding Dog under my chair: school chattering & birds tweeting. Very warm. Need to eat, drink, rest then....practise the trumpet!

Day 7 Nov. 19th

It's been a super-phonetic day! Busy all morning: started by sitting in on small group reading sessions, Grades 1&2. Using K's books, encouraging sounding words out phonetically, then blending. Also important to stop & encourage pupils to talk about the activities & animals depicted in the stories thereby enhancing comprehension & vocabulary.

Next, back outside under a tree with children from N4: they needed lots of help from flash- cards showing individual letters. They coped well with 2 letter words but struggled blending those with 3letters. This group is now my main focus & I hope to spend time with just them each morning. I'll start with separate letters using a counter game on a grid of letters- a i s n t & p where they say the sound then cover the letter with a coloured counter, go over 2&3 lettered words & use Box 1 with picture trios, then get them to match their word to one on a laminated sheet I've prepared showing the ' matched answers' to all words in boxes 1-4.

In the classroom the other tables moved on to Box 2, extending their vocabulary & improving pronunciation. They all responded well, most coping with the trio-pictures now. Great enthusiasm & teachers engaging well too, so a high sense of fun & achievement: good for us all!

Trumpet practice went well today and school's Bank manager called in to invite us to his home for dinner on Thursday evening.

Day 8 Nov. 20th

Good photos: Red-billed Firefinch & a Yellow Crowned Gonolek!

Still word-working with Brown Table & we've identified the 2 children, a boy & a girl, who need most help.

Repeat of yesterday's games: sounding individual letters & attempts at blending 2&3 letter words using large word & letter charts. Counter game too.

Box 1 pictures quickly assembled in 'trios' but some children still struggle with going back to the first letter- reading left to right (which is the opposite in their Islamic lessons!)

Have prepared four sheets with words on both sides- each one a word which can be read forwards or backwards e.g. tap which means more use/ familiarity of the same few letters. To help I've made colourful card pointers so they can 'show' how to sound & blend!

At 1pm joined Karen & Abi Batu when they presented the footballs we brought over, one to each of the Upper Basic classes. What a joy to see delighted faces & beaming smiles. Prior to my visit there had been just one football for the whole school to use. Those presented were donated by children in the U.K. whose names were written on them; lots of photos taken.

After lunch, a hot minibus ride, with Tony to the local town- Brikama. A few necessary purchases at a mini market store then we threaded our way through the avenues of closely packed, colourful market traders stalls. The heat, litter, smells & noise were not for the faint hearted! Tony found the stall he favours for fabric purchases where the owner & assistants recognised him and were friendly & helpful- not pushy and no need to barter. Colours and prints gorgeous- floor to ceiling- so much choice. Finally made decisions & bought 3 with quite different colour schemes and designs. Hopefully a local tailor will make up 2 garments for me but the third piece is large enough for an eye catching table cloth and/ cushions.

Day 9 Nov. 21st

Phonetics & Fanfares!

With N4 using the boxed word games then matching each word to one on a laminated sheet. Have progressed to Box 3 with all tables except Brown group who stuck with Box 1. The counter game is like educational bingo where the prize is satisfaction! Outside under a tree we had another phonics session helped by....Yalding Dog! After break just 2 pupils with me- they cope much better away from the noisy classroom.

At 1pm Karen took me to each of the Upper & Lower classrooms & I introduced them to the sound and sight of the trumpet! All standing, we practiced the Gambian National Anthem which has a good melody & great words.

7.40pm we were collected by the school's Bank manager Ebrima who drove us in his air-conditioned car to his home-15mins drive away- where we were welcomed and fed generously whilst he, K& T exchanged news and views. It was a gated compound. His elderly parents & sister (with one month old baby boy all "swaddled" laying on a large rug) greeted us.

Ebrima is the one who provides the "fish money" for, I think, 9 family

members who live in the compound or nearby.

We sat on leather sofas and Ebrima's wife (who didn't eat with us) served plates of hot and cold foods on a coffee table: pasta, tomatoes, cucumber, grated carrot and cabbage, chips & pieces of char-grilled chicken. Accompanied by bottled water + cartons of juice (which we were given to us to take home at the end of the evening). But we finished off the first course with home made Sorrel juice: delicious but quite sweet. After bringing us a bowl of fresh water to rinse our hands, Ebrima cut up an enormous watermelon and we enjoyed that + bananas and oranges.

Apart from a small fridge & a microwave on the floor, the only other furniture was a large wall-unit displaying a few photos, ornaments, an assortment of mis-matched drinking glasses, a TV & hi fi stack unit.

E's wife had taken food out to the other family members after we had finished eating but we stayed on chatting until well past 10pm which Ebrima thought was early to drive us home! Hospitality and atmosphere really lovely: food for thought- interesting and eye opening and indeed, humbling.

Day 10 Nov. 22nd

St. Cecilia's Day!

A blue sky day- hot hot: 38* and hardly a breath of air.

Whole school sang well along with my trumpet rendition of the Gambian National Anthem. Then back with N4 for more phonics- boxes 1,2 & 3 for all tables except Brown but they'll move on to Box 2 on Monday. Word matching good.

Then there was a Quiz Competition under a tree: N4 vs G1. Main problem- too many children on rows of benches many of whom couldn't see the board so....eyes & minds wandered.

Back on the veranda- coffee, photos & journal catch-up. Lots of visitors including 4 who have pen-pals in the U.K. They wrote letters and did some "mindfulness" colouring on pattern sheets from pads we'd taken over with us. Then, a slight movement behind me and....beautiful Binta came to talk and ended up staying for a trumpet lesson! She buzzed on a plastic mouthpiece, held the trumpet quite well & managed articulation & first finger coordination producing G's & F's? Big hug + beaming smile!

Just after 4pm Abi Batu popped over to discuss garments I'd like made up. Her tailor was summoned, styles & measurements noted & negotiations done. Cost: 400 Delasi (= about £5!!) and should be done/ delivered Monday; exciting! Count down to packing- 4 more sleeps!

Day 11 Nov. 23rd

Lazy Saturday

Slow start then began tidying/sorting things to go at the bottom of my hold-all. Washed a canvas bag & few clothes items.

Practised the trumpet: Christmas Carols from memory- felt and must have sounded bizarre in this heat! A few visitors came to chat about local matters.

Sat on veranda most of the afternoon discussing grammar & phonic ideas with

Karen. Both she & Tony spend hours each day on computers- preparing her reading scheme story books. Today they also spent a long time tidying the school storeroom.

I prepared folded coloured paper with 40 butterfly outlines for a final craft project dealing with symmetry & use of paint and scissors.

We ate about 8pm: poppadoms, spaghetti, soya mince + vegetarian bolognese sauce.

Tomorrow's plan: local church service then eating at the home of Headmaster Moses & his wife Michelle.

Day 12 Nov. 24th

Lovely, light, airy RC Church of the Good Shepherd. Tin roofed with 4 ceiling fans. Definitely all-age and all beautifully dressed. About 15 singers with 4 African drummers. Group leader played a single line on an electric keyboard or sang to start them off then conducted- probably just from a word sheet.

Gorgeous harmonies, mostly chant-style.

Lovely Minister who did an excellent talk/ sermon who explained that it's the last Sunday of the church year & will be Advent next week. He spoke of his recent trip to the Holy Land mentioning Masada & Herod's lavish lifestyle saying that we all tend to strive for "bigger & better". Quoted the passage "A fox has his den, a bird has a nest but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head ": brought me right back to the sculpture we saw/ photographed at the Tabthca site in Galilee.

Bush taxi ride to compound where Moses lives: hot, dusty, red-brick coloured sandy roads/ tracks really, with awful pot holes! Christian crosses on the gates to the compound & a sprawling dusty, part planted, part shaded garden (more like a farmstead!). Several of their 6 children + a few friends/ neighbours and 2 dogs + chickens roaming around! We sat under a huge Mango tree on upholstered chairs at a table where we were served cold beers (a first for me!).

Much later, after a long & elaborate process, we had delicious green mint tea- in tiny shot glasses after much heating, pouring, rinsing: quite a ceremony but worth the wait! A bit sweet, proper name Ataya; it's basis is dried green tea which comes in small boxes a bit like Menthol cigarettes!

Huge main course of couscous, chicken, sweet potato, carrot, onion & Bhindi/ Okra followed, much later by watermelon wedges. In the meantime K had produced a 50 piece jigsaw & bags of "KinneX shapes & instructions so we were all well (& educationally) occupied! I loved watching Michelle do the braiding on the head of her 6 year old " namesake" little girl who sat on an upturned plastic container for....ages. Hair is parted in sections, waxed then worked into lines of tiny plaits. We sang nursery rhymes & carols to help keep the child amused & still!

One son told us about his agricultural project growing seedling Paw paw plants & another discussed a craft collage with an art teacher.

We walked home, hot, dusty and tired but relaxed about 6pm.

Day 13 Nov. 25th

Temperature soared to 37* by midday!

Last under-the-tree phonics session with my two special children then back into the classroom to work with whole of Brown Table; finally moved to Box 2 words & used a word-wheel too. After break, with the other 4 tables, on to the final box-4! Hooray. 3 different word-wheels in use now: all with 3 letter words ending p n & t.

Sent lots of photos to a number of people in the Len valley Benefice & waiting for TAP Portugal to send an email so I can check in ready for tomorrow night's outbound flight which is at 2.05am- yuk!

Soon after midday Abi came over with her tailor: two beautifully made, brightly coloured garments. Love them- long top with pretty ruffled sleeves & a green "dotty" below-the-knee flared culottes with wrap over effect- a copy of something I wore in the Holy Land (when we went to the "wailing wall".) Both will need washing before wearing to remove the waxy stiffness.

Part of the afternoon spent in Abi's office sorting through lots of art work made by former pupils & kept stored/ out of sight, unclaimed- what a shame! Varied mediums: coloured stitch work on canvas, matchstick art, sand art, wood-block/ relief style & bright intricate beading. Found a Gambian Peacock-look-a-like & chose two sand art pictures which K & T will be able to bring back to the U.K. for me. Several others pieces will look great displayed on the walls outside on the veranda. (Did manage to hang a couple up on the walls of Abi's office as there were already nails available- hope they stay put!)

Back at Tonka Kunda K tried out the paint suitable for the butterfly/ symmetry project I'm doing with Grade 1 tomorrow.

Did a full half hour of trumpet practice- more carols! Then began preparing to pack for the journey home.

Day 14 Nov. 26th

It's going to be a long one!

Busy- butterfly me all morning 9-1pm.

First stop: N1- had a guessing game before I opened the trumpet case then simple "call & echo": accurate pitch & rhythm-great response. Then a short repertoire of 3 songs: Twinkle twinkle, Heads, shoulders, knees & toes + If you're happy & you know it. Lots of happy voices & faces.

N2 were having PE so, after a quick coffee, K & I went to start the butterfly project with G1. Pre-folded paper (half butterfly shape on 'front' page), 2x colour paint "splodges" on inside right then...quickly close, press smooth then open.....s l o w l y (with a little help) & wow: symmetry! A pattern, great glee- then collected up and taken back to Tonka Kunda, pegged out the washing line to dry! Back to class after break- children got their own art work back & were set to cut along the outlines of the butterfly shapes which, with help from a tall teacher, were mounted on a wall up & above a window spreading towards the door. Gorgeous- fulfilling for the pupils & very satisfying for us.

Whizz back to collect my trumpet then call & echo responses + songs in N2.

Called in to N3 where, earlier this week, we had made rocking chickens to sing again (with no rhyme!). Then they sang to me a lovely song saying how I

would be "taking the sunshine away.." when I left.....NOT so, I told them because in England it's 'proper' November weather- grey, cold & miserable no doubt! Ah, their faces & words such a lovely take home memory. I felt very touched.

Final photo shoot lining up with the Teaching Team in N4 where I've spent most of my school lesson- time & come to feel integrated & constructive/ helpful, hopefully.

Later Moses brought over large swathes of 2 different, richly coloured fabrics- a gift from school to us here at Tonka Kunda. To be made up by a local tailor; shirts for Tony & Neill and kaftans for Karen & me- can't wait to see them when we all meet up in the U.K.! A perfect and unique reminder of the extraordinary time I've had the privilege to experience here in The Gambia. Praise the Lord!